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ABSTRACT

Grouping, a compromise arrangement between the traditional, structured classroom and complete individualization, frees students from teacher domination, supplies the social setting necessary for learning a language, and provides incentive for everyone to participate actively in the learning process. This paper describes a plan developed foor intermediate levels of foreign language learning. Each group is assigned a different reading passage, not according to ability but according to interest. Over a period of several days students become thoroughly acquainted with their group's selection. They ask each other questions and help each other with understanding the text. The teacher, moving around the classroom, points out and explains the most difficult spots. Oral practice within the group prepares for the next phase which is exchange of information. Each student is paired with a member of a different group, and each tells the other, in the target language, as much as he or she can about the reading selection his or her group has been working on. The listening partner is encouraged to ask questions about anything he or she does not understand. After these oral exchanges have been completed, the students individually write a short resume of their own reading selection, in the target language and without consulting the text. (Author/CFM)

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We all know that the intermediate class is the graveyard of the FL program. No matter what approaches are taken in the initial stages of learning, most students become so disheartened that they give up FL study before they are able to master any of the basic skills.

Many factors are involved in students' discouragement with FL learning. One is that their enthusiasm for the FL wanes as they begin to realize that their goal of effortless use of the language is receding further and further the longer they work at it. Related to this factor is the fact that the criteria against which they can measure their own progress become less easily discernible as they acquire more knowledge and skill. Another component which has long been recognized is that students come to intermediate classes highly differentiated as to training and native ability, so that already at the beginning of the course some feel that they should actually be starting over, while others feel that the work is too elementary. A factor which has been largely disregarded in the planning of programs is that at this stage, after students have been introduced to the basic grammar and vocabulary, they want to follow their own interests. Most of us language teachers were initially drawn to a major in the language we teach by a love for language and literature; but the majority of our students have quite different purposes in pursuing language study. Some of us teachers actually tend to favor those students who most closely resemble ourselves.

Three main solutions to these problems have been tried out with varying degrees of success. One is to "track" students according to ability in response to the variety of their preparations. This solution may be comfortable for both teacher and student, but it is unrealistic, and it may be harmful to some students. Another is that students are "tracked" according to their interests, and special classes are set up for students in science, social studies, and literature, for example. Thus they are given a choice of reading material, but practically they have scheduling problems, and educationally they are deprived of contact with students with different interests and viewpoints. Some teachers have attempted complete individualization,

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providing each student with learning packets which allow him to progress at his own speed and/or according to his own interests. My experience with such programs, both my own and others', is that allowing complete freedom of choice leads to fragmentation in instruction and loss of one of the classroom's most important functions: its function as a social setting in which to use the language more or less naturally and realistically.

The present paper considers primarily the problem of the variety of interests among students. It describes procedures which evolved during a five-year period of developing, testing, revising, and retesting a set of materials which started out as a completely individualized program and emerged as a coordinated system. It gives students their choice of a series of readings according to interest, on which they work in groups, but at the same time they do not lose contact with the other members of the class. The materials developed are available for German[1], but the techniques and procedures can be used in any intermediate language class.

In German there is a substantial number of science students, as many as 25% of any intermediate class, whose goal in learning German is to read technical works in their own fields. The traditional reaction of German departments has been that these students could best be served if they learned to read any type of German — that meant literary, of course — because once the learner became familiar with the structure and basic vocabulary of the language he would be able to transfer his knowledge to any field. Experience has shown, however, that this was not the case. Potentially good students usually blame their failure to do well on placement tests on a lack of familiarity with the vocabulary of the test passages. Moreover, linguistic analysis shows that the grammar of German scholarly and scientific writing presents different problems from the grammar of belles lettres. Besides those students who have specific purposes in learning German, there are those who, when given their choice, want to read something other than the usual literary texts used in most intermediate classes.

The other commonly taught languages may not present such radical stylistic differences between literary and informational writing as German does. However, teachers

who have been using conventional literary-cultural readers in intermediate classes should consider conducting surveys among students to discover their reading interests. There are probably students of French who would prefer a book on international law to *Lettres de mon Moulin*, and there may be some learners of Spanish who would be more interested in working on the language of commerce than in reading *Platero y yo*.

But giving students their choice is not enough to insure success. In groping our way out of the chaos of the completely individualized program, with its problems of providing learning packets, tests, and retests, and, most agonizingly, of keeping records straight, we discovered strategies which provided more realistic practice of all four skills and at the same time assured more coherence in the classroom.

Students are now offered a choice of reading passages among four broad topical areas. The texts are of comparable length and difficulty, but they deal with quite different subject matters, so that each student is able to find something that is of genuine interest to him. Each self-selected group then works as a unit, preparing its text: being sure that all understand the meaning of the passage, asking each other questions, role-playing — in short getting thoroughly acquainted with the vocabulary, the structures, and hence the complete meaning of the passage. After three or four class hours of this intensive work in groups, each student is paired off with a member of another group, and each tells the other — in the target language of course — as much as he can about the text he has been reading. The final activity in connection with any unit is that each student is asked to write five to ten sentences in answer to a general question on his passage.

Let me interject here that it is not necessary to prepare a complete course to make effective use of the strategies. They can be used on occasion in any intermediate class. A teacher can get started by preparing one unit of diversified readings and trying it out with a class.

The first step is to conduct a survey of interests[2] among the students in a class or a multi-sectioned course. Then pick several broad areas which will be likely to

appeal to the greatest number. Next, look for a reading selection on a subject in each of the broad fields. Besides the more conventional sources of reading material — newspapers, periodicals, and anthologies of literature, for example — I have found in developing the German materials two very helpful sources: publications of government agencies in Austria, the two Germanies, and Switzerland, and textbooks used in the secondary schools of those countries.

After the selections have been made, each must be carefully prepared, with notes on vocabulary and grammar, perhaps an exercise or two on the knottiest of the grammar problems, questions on the text, and suggestions for role-playing or other game-like activities. This careful preparation of texts is necessary so that each group can work independently of the teacher during a part of each class period.

When the members of the class have made their selections, each is given a copy of his passage, along with notes, questions, etc. Preparatory reading has to be done outside of class, for it must be made clear to the students that the classroom is primarily a social setting.

Each student comes to class the first day having marked the problems he encountered in understanding the meaning of the passage. Many of these can be solved in consultation with other members of his group, but the most difficult are saved for the visit of the teacher. On this first day of group work, the teacher may not be able to insist on exclusive use of the target language, although most of his own explanations to the group can be made in that language.

The second phase of preparation consists of the students' asking each other questions on the content, some prepared by the teacher, others by members of the group. The third phase consists of additional activities such as role-playing, dialogue construction, or other recombinations of the text.

The teacher's role during group work is to serve as a resource person for linguistic and cultural problems. He must not regard himself, nor can his students regard him, as an authority on all the details of all the subjects treated in the various reading passages.

After the thorough practice as described, each student has a chance to apply what he has learned to a new situation. He now pairs off with a person who has read a different selection, and each of the pair reports to the other on the reading he has been working on. Since the conversation which takes place between these two people involves an actual exchange of information, it is as close to reality as any that can be set up in the classroom without outside help. Students are forced to sharpen up their language tools: reporters to make clear explanations, listeners to ask meaningful questions.

Most students come to enjoy this phase of the learning process. They become much more animated than they are in the conventional teacher-managed classroom. They gesture and smile at each other, sometimes they even make drawings or diagrams to illustrate a point. And most important as a motivational factor, the students of chemistry, economics, and psychology have a chance to display their talents on an equal footing with those primarily interested in literature.

The role of the teacher is to listen selectively to the general babble, making sure that the target language is being used. He will certainly be appalled at the number of mistakes he hears, but he may also be gratified at the fluency being developed. As for the mistakes, only cases of gross misunderstanding need to be cleared up at this time, and only after it has become clear that the pair has come to an impasse. On a later day a few errors made repeatedly by a majority of the students can be explained and drilled in corrective practice.

Writing practice is provided by a short composition which forms the last phase. Here the student produces his own recombination of the material, relying mostly on memory but also restructuring by the very act of condensation.

There are several advantages to be gained by developing units of reading on various topics, and there is one quite considerable disadvantage. Let me deal with the disadvantage first: the time and effort expended in discovering suitable passages and preparing them for group work. My suggestion is that teachers get together, form workshops, and pool resources and

efforts to produce materials for common use.

The advantages are worth the time and effort. First is the motivational factor. When students feel that they have some control over what they learn and how they are learning it, they are simply more willing to work than they are in the completely teacher-dominated classroom. Second is that all four basic skills are practiced more realistically than in the conventional class. Actual information is gained through reading. Listening and speaking practice become rudimentary but real communication. Writing is not yet free composition, but controls are relaxed.

The most important advantage is that the broad gap between what Bloom calls "transfer"[3] (the understanding and application of recombined materials) and real communication can be spanned. The most reliable resource for new vocabulary — when total immersion in the foreign culture is impossible — is reading. Moreover, that new vocabulary is embedded in a natural context, and thus the learner is constantly exposed to the structure of the target language. As he reads and talks about things that interest him, he gains ammunition to express his understanding of factual knowledge, and eventually his own thoughts.

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[1]Ursula Thomas, in cooperation with Freeman Twaddell, Lesestoff nach Wahl: Einführung, Biologie, Literatur, Mensch und Gesellschaft, and Physik und Chemie, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1977.

[2]See Renée S. Disick, Individualizing Language Instruction, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1975, pp. 190, 191.

[3]See Rebecca M. Valette and Renée S. Disick, Modern Language Performance Objectives and Individualization, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1972, pp. 33-41.

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